

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005  
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Lecture Notes, May 18

## I. The second clause of the standard (liberal) conception of marriage, continued

The standard conception holds that marriage is a

- 1) lifelong union between
- 2) one man and one woman,
- 3) who freely choose each other,
- 4) often affirmed in a religious context, and
- 5) recognized by the state.
- 6) It is generally, though not inevitably, expected that married couples of childbearing age will have children, and that
- 7) children are to be raised within these families.

We looked at challenges to each clause of the standard conception.

Single-sex marriage is the main challenge to the second clause.

Bennett says that he's concerned that any changes to the standard conception will entail the loss of a principled way to define marriage.

He worries that once we accept single-sex marriage, we have no principled reasons to disallow marriage among family members, or between humans and animals, or between adults and minors, or other "sexually relativistic" conceptions of marriage.

Bennett's claim is wrong, though.

There are good, principled reasons to oppose, for example, incestuous marriages, or marriages between adults and minors, that do not exist in the case of single-sex marriage.

There is no serious movement to extend marriage in these other ways.

It is probably best to take these proposals individually, and see if there are good reasons to oppose them.

The most plausible other proposed change to the second clause concerns the number of people one may marry.

Elizabeth Joseph defends plural marriage, specifically polygamy, which is a marriage among one man and many wives.

'Polygamy' is a general term, which strictly means 'many marriages'.

I'll just use the phrase 'plural marriage' as a general term.

'Polyandry' refers to marriages among one woman and many men, which is much less common, of course.

Note that if the plural marriage proponents are right, we might have to excise clause 2) from the *traditional* conception, too.

(Recall that I called the concept which included all clauses except the third "traditional".

But plural marriage has biblical, and other traditional, precedent.)

Joseph defends plural marriage on the basis of "feminism."

It's hard to believe any feminist defending a situation where a woman has to make appointments for sex

with her husband, and defer to other wives if they have already signed up!  
The plural marriage Joseph describes does not seem like an arrangement in which the wives are empowered.  
But terms like 'feminist' are plastic.

Joseph argues that plural marriage reduces her workload.  
It generally enables women to "fully meet their career, mothering, and marriage obligations." (312)  
She can go to work in the morning with good childcare from another wife.  
Her kids don't need to learn to fix their own dinners.  
She doesn't have to make a big deal about dinner every night, only on Mondays.  
She doesn't have to suffer his advances in her bed, presumably.

One wonders whether there are other means to these ends.  
An obvious one is to involve the father in dinner-making and childcare.  
Kids making their own breakfasts actually seems like a good thing.

Balancing child-raising and career is difficult for women.  
Where is the problem, really?  
Empowerment for women generates some difficulties.  
Take even the simple case of the family name.  
Hyphenation just puts the problem on the next generation.  
We could each adopt a single name, as some people do in Mongolia.  
This abandons the idea of a family name.

Joseph provides some broadly utilitarian considerations in favor of plural marriage.  
They seem insufficient to defend this extension.  
But the argument is in the right form.  
If there were good reasons to allow plural marriage, we should consider them.  
Joseph just hasn't provided any.

## II. Single-sex marriage and promiscuity

Bennett's other worry is about the "well-known" promiscuity among homosexual males.  
I wonder about the evidence here.  
Heterosexual men are pretty promiscuous, too.  
No homosexual men are married to other men, so they aren't breaking marriage vows.  
Sullivan basically concedes that gay men are more promiscuous, though, and attributes it to the ban on same-sex marriage.  
He notes that if men are more promiscuous than women, any weakening of marriage that would arise which arises from abandoning monogamy would be balanced by the strengthening that would arise from lesbian couples.  
This misinterprets Bennett's claim, that the difference in promiscuity is attributable to homosexuality, rather than gender.

Even if we accept Bennett's claim, it begs an important question of why gays are more promiscuous than straights.  
Sullivan's claim is that this is connected to the prohibition.  
Marriage acts as an incentive, and social sanction.  
This seems underestimated by opponents of single-sex marriage.

More importantly, it's hard to see how extending marriage benefits to homosexuals weakens the institution.

It would seem to strengthen it, by extending its reach.